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'Coming Out' in the Modern Novel

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Intro to Thesis

Abstract:

This paper examines two modern young adult novels to consider the ways in which these novels have adopted portions of the coming out. The books being examined are *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, by Emily M. Danforth and *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, by Becky Albertalli, and are important as representatives of queer modern young adult novels because of their fame and because the novels appropriate portions of the coming out trope to begin discourse on the importance of narrative. My goal is to understand why the coming out plot, which typically targets adults, has been adopted by a younger audience and how this adoption further builds into our understandings of the books: how can one gain or regain control of their own narrative?

Timeline:

1942: *Seventeenth Summer*, by Maureen Daly published

- Considered by some to be a precursor to young adult fiction. Others consider it to be the first young adult novel, predating the term

1945: World War II ended

- The economic boom after WWII, plus modern technology, leads to the development of financial independence for many and the market for teens, a new separate entity from children and adults

1957: Term 'young adult' formalized by American Library Association

1967: *The Outsiders*, by S. E. Hinton, was published

1969: Stonewall Riots. *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, by John Donovan was published

- Considered the first young adult novel to feature a gay main character

1973: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) removed homosexuality from their list of diagnoses. *Rubyfruit Jungle*, by Rita Mae Brown, was published

1982: *A Boy's Own Story*, by Edmund White, was published

1992: *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story*, by Paul Monette, was published

2012: *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, by Emily M. Danforth was published

2015: *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, by Becky Albertalli, was published

Background:

Young adult fiction is a genre that only began after the rise of consumerism and youth culture in the post-World War II boom and, in fact, this form of fiction was contingent on the rise of both in American culture (Lewis 2-3). The genre typically targets people in middle school to high school, about the twelve- to eighteen-year age range, with problems related to that age; *The Outsiders*, by S. E. Hinton is a good example of one of the first. Other young adult novels had been published prior to *The Outsiders*, yet this book was significant for its commercial success and continued literary importance. Prior to 1957, books targeting about the same age group were not necessarily young adult novels since “the practice of referring to “young adult” literature was formalized... when the American Library Association created its Young Adult Services Division, which focused librarians’ attention on how to serve this new population” (Cart n.p.). CNN writer Ashely Strickland notes that Maureen Daly, for instance, wrote *Seventeenth Summer* (1942), and it acquired a teen audience, yet the novel is not necessarily within the canon of young adult novels since it came prior to the official label, though some scholars would argue that *Seventeenth Summer*, a “junior novel” (Allen 1), is actually a precursor to young adult novels targeting teen women (Strickland n.p.). The first popular canonical young adult novels, like S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*, typified struggles with identity, violence, and friendship (Cart

n.p.). In the sixties, young adult novels were “books that... tended to be both male-oriented and peopled almost exclusively with Caucasian characters” (Burns 102). Later books began to become aware of women as consumers, and authors like Judy Blume flourished, discussing burgeoning womanhood, sexuality and romance, though these books were still primarily focused on heterosexual Caucasians. A prime example of this discussion, by Judy Blume, is her novel *Forever...* (1975), about a teen girl’s first love. While the topics of these books differ, both examples depict a kind of coming of age experience – not all young adult books are bildungsroman stories, though the two are often intertwined (VanderStaay 49). As the genre grew and publishers became more and more aware of the market, the topics shifted to match. Today, there are young adult novels to discuss any and all issues; eating disorders, race, mental illness, loss of a family member, and gender and sexuality (PBS Digital Studios).

Here, I will note that the word ‘genre’ is used loosely; young adult novels target that age group, and some would classify that as a simple marketing strategy, however, others would argue that the marketing strategy has evolved to include its own tropes and expectations. Some of this discourse was found on the comments section of the PBS video cited above, since the typical understanding of young adult is important, as well as the scholarly understanding. Ultimately, the choice to classify young adult as marketing strategy or genre appears to be a classification based upon discipline or the lens of study and at times the young adult novel is both genre and term for advertising and marketing. Mark Cadden discusses this in his essay on children’s literature and young adult literature and the distinctions between them, stating that “often [they] struggle with what defines the genre” and, asking for clarification, “[w]hat makes a book marketed to children and packaged in a certain format a children’s novel, and not something else? What are the

characteristics...?" (Cadden 302). Thus it is both about marketing and something else, about themes and other characteristics, that define a novel as young adult versus children's versus adult's. The diversity of novels, particularly the young adult novel that this paper focuses upon, is thus notable, especially the recent growth in young adult novels featuring or discussing queer youth and coming out.

A rise in popularity of young adult novels featuring queer characters coming out is significant because there already is a coming out trope, dating from the late thirties to the nineties. The trope is a story of sexual difference, coming out, and joining the gay and lesbian community which means that the plot always ends in a happy ending. Not all gay and lesbian books in this time period were coming out plots then. The trope gained popularity and traction in the sixties and seventies following the passing of the Library Bill of Rights (1939) which led to libraries offering theoretically limitless free information, the removal of anti-constitutional anti-sodomy laws (years vary by state) (Eskridge 23, 63) and the shifting definition of homosexuality as disease to homosexuality as identity (1973) (Saxey 2)(Cornog Abstract)(Frické Abstract). These coming out books targeted adults and were successful outside the mainstream. Important fact relating to these books is that, despite the removal of censorship laws,

authors... with diverse content are disproportionately challenged and banned, which includes books with "LGBT main and/or secondary characters" or "LGBT issues" (American Library Association). While the Office for Intellectual Freedom collects reports of formal complaints, "for each challenge reported there are as many as four or five that go unreported" (Office for Intellectual Freedom), which can include self-censorship and quiet bans. (Abate et al. 205-206).

Several of these coming out type books were popular, but it is with the caveat that they were often impacted by censorship in some way; books featuring queer characters, from then to now, are often on banned books lists. For example, the children's book *And Tango Makes Three* (2005) was one of the top ten most banned books of 2012 and has been consistently featured on the banned books list (Grinberg n.p.). In 2018, in the top eleven most banned books, six were banned, at least in part, due to their LGBTQ+ content (Sorto n.p.). Interest in the coming out plot, however, fell away in the mid-90's. As Esther Saxey notes in the Introduction chapter of her book *Homoplot: The Coming-out Story and Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity*, "[c]ritics both hostile and enthusiastic have read the coming out story as being repetitive, almost like a folktale, always based on a series of stages and delivering the same closure" (Saxey 12). Simply put, coming out stories in media, particularly in novels, had fallen out of fashion after many queer authors had inserted themselves into the literary canon in one formulaic way: Diana Frederics's and/or Diana Rummel's *Diana: A Strange Autobiography* (1939), Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story* (1982) and Paul Monette's *Becoming a Man* (1992) are examples.

To connect the coming out plot to young adult novels, both began development around the same time. For various reasons, there appears to be little to no overlap between the two throughout their conception and growth; one reason being that coming out was more difficult for minors and the growing gay and lesbian movement was a growing movement organized by adults with families they made from their community. The "first openly gay-oriented novel for young adults" is widely believed to be Jonathon Donovan's *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969) and after the publication of Donovan's novel, in the following years, "an average of

only four or five new titles with gay protagonists [were] being published annually” (Burns 101), showing that Donovan’s novel was the first to feature a gay protagonist (Gross 64). Other authors followed his example, with gay or lesbian main characters but the numbers of books published were not a huge percentage of all published novels. There was demand for queer novels, but it was typically limited in scope, with more restrictions for younger audiences. Limitations placed upon queer content in books was through censorship and censorship laws, bans, and quiet bans, which created a gap in the literature of young adult novels. Today, as previously asserted, that gap has been minimized and novels’ definitions of mature content have shifted drastically from previous generations – sexuality and violence have shifted, movie ratings have shifted, and through all of that, queer literature has benefited, with author David Levithan noting that “‘LGBT voices’” have been put “‘into words’” and “‘publishers are putting them into print in unprecedented numbers’” (qtd. in Burns 103). Unfortunately, this quote is presented with the caveat that books featuring LGBT characters are still banned in some capacity more often than books not featuring LGBT characters. However, the popularity of books and adaptations, like *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* and *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, has led to strides the publishing industry supporting more books featuring gay and lesbian characters and has further led to those books being more available to a younger audience. Thus, at this time, it is now possible for the coming out plot to intersect with young adult novels because gay and lesbian books are more prevalent and because they are less censored. But why does the coming out plot intersect with young adult novels?

Coming Out in Narrative:

The formula for a classic coming out story began with a character who was aware of some innate difference between themselves and others and follows with the character realizing that that difference is their sexuality, coming out to the world in one fell swoop, and then being united with the queer community through that moment of release and catharsis. This is summarized briefly by Esther Saxey in *Homoplot: The Coming-Out Story and Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity*:

The coming out story describes an individual's path to lesbian, gay or bisexual identity. Its protagonist is most likely to be a troubled teenager whose insistent desires drag him or her through a minefield of social and sexual dramas. The protagonist gathers clues to make sense of the situation, but the reader is often sure well in advance where the protagonist is headed (Saxey 1).

The coming out plot essentials are noted; the main character is gay or lesbian, the main character is troubled by their sexual difference in youth and yet is unaware of said difference, and then the main character goes on a quest where they "[gather] clues to make sense of the situation" (Saxey 1). In the discover, the main character attains a happy ending. That exemplifies the typical coming out story. Valerie Rohy elaborates on the trope trademarks, asserting that "an adult narrator typically recalls a character's first sense of difference, her discovery of same-sex attraction, and her struggle to connect with the gay community" (Rohy 172). The significance of the adult narrator, recalling their teen years, in a book that discusses youth and confusion is notable because it is inaccessible to teens. It is inaccessible because the narrator is a different age than the readers and because the narrator is thus insistent on adolescent pain being transient. The recollection and the happy ending of the coming out plot aligns with this concept of wait, it gets

better. Comforting to some, but hard to relate to for most. Pairing this quote with Saxey's quote, the crossover with the sense of difference is also important. The protagonist in a coming out plot is aware of difference, a difference that is initially unknown to the protagonist but that is known to readers through narrative strategies, like "an adult narrator... recalls"; that difference is their sexuality, and the recollection forces the narrative to precisely focus on sexual difference (Rohy 172). Together, these quotes describe the typical trademarks of the "coming out" plot. Yet, these quotes also are necessary for interrogating how this story translates to a younger audience.

The coming out plot was problematized, however, for several perceived shortcomings that I argue are, to some extent, resolved through the modern incorporation of the plot into young adult novels. Scholar Danielle Bobker notes that there is this

fear that the language of the closet is deceptive in its binary simplicity. Notably, theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Michael Warner have shown that the basic assumption of coming out discourse—that homosexuals can and should seek a special sort of recognition of their difference—rests on and perpetuates pervasive misconceptions about such central categories in our culture as knowledge, identity, and agency (Bobker 34).

The essay prefaces its argument with a thoughtful discussion of Jodie Foster's speech at the 2013 Golden Globes, wherein Foster articulates her discomfort about coming out to the impersonal public. That preface, as well as the scholarship Bobker cites, displays a certain antagonism between queer theory/queer people and the heteronormative assumption and consumption of coming out. The phrase "binary simplicity" points to this personal and scholarly problem of naming or labeling, defining oneself away from the assumed norm by instead identifying as

other, as well as the issue of being known as other by everyone (Bobker 34). Fear is in the need for recognition and fear is also in the question of who needs to know? In the case of Jodie Foster, her speech acknowledged her queerness while remaining, decidedly, not a speech about coming out, because she had already done so to the people she deemed worthy of knowing.

In a similar vein, the coming out plot had a razor focus on coming out – the traditional narrative is wholly organized around the realization that the narrator is gay and then the moment they release that information. But that formula is a dull formula, like the marriage plot is a dull formula because the conclusion is known from the outset. In young adult novels, the incorporation of certain coming out plot elements allows the narrative to be more surprising than older coming out books. As Claire Gross notes in Horn Book Magazine, “a good coming-out novel is about more than just coming out. The best ones weave their coming-out stories into larger dramatic narratives” (Gross 64).

Canonicity:

Through history, it is apparent that basically as long as young adult novels have been in publication, there have been young adult books with gay and lesbian characters. The percentage of queer young adult literature published, of course, was vastly different from today, and the types of narratives published were also vastly different. Older books with gay and lesbian characters were different too. Older ones presented homosexuality with death often, i.e. the main character dies a tragic death or death surrounds them, and further, those older often also present homosexuality as a phase. *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip*, for example, the main character is gay but not at the end. Now there are many books targeting young adults, as well as tweens, children, and beginner readers, that have queer characters that are not tied to death and

are consistently queer. What is notable though is the growth in popularity of these books, and how it has led to diverse books about coming out entering into the mainstream market. Further, it is notable how the diversity in books, especially books featuring gay and lesbian characters, has led to the diversity in narratives. In a review about queer literature, it is noted that in the 1970's, eight young adult novels included "death figures in three... and a violent rape, in a fourth... [and] [i]n the others homosexuality is presented as a passing phase" (Burns 107) and this is because of queer tropes that endure until today, scholar Rohy notes that readerly expectations assume that "[w]here their end is not fatal, that is, queer figures are relegated to punitive or pathological roles" (Rohy 171). The books described in the section about history, the ones in the young adult genre, separate from the coming out plot books, were perpetuating stereotypes about homosexual characters over and over again, the same fatal archetypes that are still seen today in film, TV, and books: homosexuality as deviant and deadly or as a choice, a phase without impact upon a typically heterosexual youth. The coming out plot is then a significant way for young adult novels to use pre-existing plot structures of queer narrative for a younger audience to show an alternative narrative to the two previously listed.

Over the last couple of decades, the variety of young adult novels has led to more and more books addressing issues of coming out and experiencing romance as a gay, lesbian, bisexual, teen. Thus, in some way, the aged and tired coming out plot that appeared to have died in the nineties has made a resurgence, in some different, transformed, fashion. This is how we can conceive of the two novels this thesis will focus upon: *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, by Emily M. Danforth and *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, by Becky Albertalli. Yet though these books are inherently related to coming out plots through their focus on journeys of

sexuality and self-discovery, it is not wholly accurate to portray both books, as well as others beyond the scope of this paper, as appropriating the coming out plot in similar fashions. For instance, the coming out plot describes Cameron Post's narrative journey, a journey from ignorance about the one's difference to realization and acceptance into the gay community, but it does not accurately depict *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, as well as other more modern young adult novels featuring queer characters, like *Totally Joe* (2007), by James Howe, *Red, White & Royal Blue* (2019), by Casey McQuiston, *Carry On* (2015), by Rainbow Rowell, *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) and *Boy Meets Boy* (2003), by David Levithan, et cetera. The connection between these other books has less to do with plot structure and more to do with concepts, emphases, like those of self-discovery and acceptance, coming out, and finding community.

In examining *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012) and *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015), two modern young adult novels that reached into the mainstream with movie adaptations that garnered attention and/or acclaim, it is my hope to learn how the coming out plot has changed in its transition from the adult audience to the young adult audience and why these changes were necessary (Ryan n.p.). Further, I hope to learn whether or not this movement shall lead to more diverse narratives and further representation. To do so, this paper will have four sections: this section, the introduction, as well as a section focusing on Becky Albertalli's novel, and another section focusing Emily M. Danforth's novel, and then the concluding section.

Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda Book Analysis

Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda, on the other hand, is boldly modern, sometimes even painfully modern with its use of the internet, with Tumblr blogs, and email. When I chose these two books, I chose them because of their obvious differences: the time setting, the plot conflicts, the lesbian and the gay. Yet, the two books are still about queer young adults struggling with sexuality, with coming out, with taking control of their narratives and doing so in decidedly hostile areas/situations. Cameron is in a small town in the Midwest, and Simon is in a small town, near Atlanta, but nonetheless in Georgia. In the discussion of coming out, though, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* is far more explicit and the main character ruminates constantly about the concept of “coming out.” In *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, coming out is made difficult by environment, people and language. The lesbian figure is essentially invisible until the beginning of her adolescence, and even then only through the intrusion of a city girl on the rural farming community. Prior to this intrusion, she lacks proper language, and thus proper Lacanian subjectivity, because people with more knowledge, typically adults, around Cameron control and conceal language. In *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, however, the queer community, queer people, queer support, is readily available online, in nearby Atlanta, and – though hidden beneath Simon’s awareness – in his local high school community. The gay figure is visible to some degree, the language is known – mocked by some – but still readily available and along with that visibility is knowledge about coming out and the general treatment of gay people. There is open support as well as open bullying of gay characters within Simon’s narrative. Thus, Simon as a character has a multiplicity of advantages that Cameron Post lacks due to time, setting and gender, and the most notable advantage is language, which empowers

both characters to take back control of their narratives in general and their coming out stories specifically.

The book begins with blackmail. The blackmailer, Martin Addison, wants to date the blackmailee's, titular character Simon, best friend Abby Suso, an Honors girl of color. This opening chapter establishes that the main character is gay, that he has connected with another gay boy from the high school through Tumblr, that these two boys email now using pseudonyms, and that that information is known only to them and the blackmailer. The initial Tumblr post that connects the two is posted by Blue, the pseudonym for Simon's love interest, and the boy posts about how little anyone can know of anyone else, specifically about sexuality, but broadly about their life and struggles. Through their emails, they bond over their secret sexuality, but also over their music tastes, their writing styles, and their awkward but supportive families. Martin Addison's invasion into this intimate online space threatens this because both boys are not "out" and one of the two, Blue, is not ready to come out. This then sets up the way in which Simon's coming out narrative, as well as Blue's, has been threatened. Through the novel, the readers follow to see how the knowledge of Simon's sexuality spreads, willingly or unwillingly, throughout the local community – though mostly focusing on his family, his friends and his school. The dispersal of information, controlled and uncontrolled, exemplifies the power imbalance in a binary system where heterosexual is the norm and where homosexual is secret until it's come out.

What's interesting about this book, and about the other book I examine, is the relationship they have to other texts and music. The titles of both books are direct references to other things – Cameron Post's title harkens back to an album entitled *The Miseducation of*

Lauryn Hill, and “the Homo Sapiens Agenda” of *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* is a reference to the theoretical “homosexual agenda,” wherein queer people ‘convert’ heterosexual people to queer and perverse lifestyles with debauched sex lives. Beyond the titles, though, there is this broad necessity of literature to build off of previous literature, to build from a previously existing canon and respond to that canon as well. In gender, sexuality and queer studies, this is especially necessary because these books must differentiate themselves from the heteronormative cisgender adult white male canon, the most conventional and classical literary canon.

The Miseducation of Cameron Post builds off of established queer conventions in literature and media and changes them to make the characters and story more human, and the well-known somewhat campy tropes more like a narrative. For one thing, there are several instances of Cameron’s sexuality becoming known, though only one is a conscious verbal confession on her part. This is important because in the trope template, coming out only occurs once, at the end. For another, Cameron Post begins the book aware of her sexuality, of her supposed difference, and the narrative is not solely focused on accepting and confessing – instead, the novel is about who controls her narrative, how she fits into her environment as she ages and her environment changes, leading to her eventually choosing her own friends, family, and home. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* instead focuses deeply on coming out and is, overall, a more light-hearted story that does not take on all of the violent, traumatic and damaging narrative baggage that Danforth takes on. While the focus on coming out may make the novel appear to be more similar to the “coming out” trope, in fact, the focus is what makes the book more evolved and complex than the trope. Simon, as well as his boyfriend and email pen pal Blue, come out several times throughout the novel and together the two boys consider

what it means to come out and the various ways in which information is shared and relayed.

Becky Albertalli ultimately decides to focus on more modern issues, like high school bullying, high school crushes, dating, drinking and partying, as the characters grow to become less self-focused and grow to learn more about others, community, and performance. The pairing of the typical high school experience with the special focus on the main character who could come out, theoretically, has not come out and yet is simultaneously exhausted by the process of repeatedly coming out with new interests, new friends, new everything, and reintroducing himself to others like his family, friends and acquaintances is important because it works to normalize the queer experience within the present. This work is seen in this passage, as Simon writes to Blue about coming out:

That's the thing people wouldn't understand. This coming out thing. It's not even about me being gay, because I know deep down that my family would be fine with it... But I'm tired of coming out. All I ever do is come out. I try not to change, but I keep changing in all these tiny ways... And every freaking time, I have to reintroduce myself to the universe all over again (Albertalli 55-56).

The language here is short and simple. It appears like the narrator is struggling to articulate his issues with coming out, maybe because he knows that coming out is safe and he's aware that that safety is a privilege. The stop and start cadence of the sentences though implies that what he's describing is hard for him to articulate and this struggle to communicate his true issue with coming out speaks to his singularity. At this point in time, the only other gay person he knows is Blue, the boy he emails. His struggle to define the problem with coming out stems from the fact that he views coming out as more than simply coming out with sexuality – coming out is instead

a process of introducing something unknown to others, like sexuality, but also like a new favorite food. It is a practice of introduction, but a practice that is exclusively for people within a minority which is “the thing people wouldn’t understand” (Albertalli 55). Coming out is exclusively for people who need to show difference and that targeting is an exhausting process, when it is not necessary for it to be that way – because, instead, it can be a way to introduce any change at any time, and not a process specifically for people who are queer. Further, the process of the repetition and the acceptance by other people is tiring and the decision to communicate the information over and over has mental consequences. To come out in Cameron Post’s world is to have a narrative stolen and then to have that narrative stolen over and over again through small town gossip and well-meaning but misplaced religious zealots. To come out in Simon Spier’s world is to have the narrative stolen through blackmail, but to still have the power to share with people in person, like his parents and older sister. The blackmail, the anonymous school blog, and the main character’s emails with Blue, an online pseudonym for a boy within the school named Bram, are all facilitated through the internet and everything except the emails becomes accessible to everyone through the world wide web. The internet has real world consequences in Simon’s school, as when the blackmailer Martin posts about Simon’s sexuality on the school blog, but this post has little sway over his home or love life since he has power over his identity and that information with those he’s close to. Cameron’s loss of control is only regained with the help of her chosen family, the people she’s close to, and Simon’s control is similarly linked to people who care about him. Narrative control is stolen to be harmful, but the restoration of control is a healing process with friends or family. Simon’s healing process is an in-person process because human contact and identity are essential – though the internet did initially facilitate that contact with his love interest Blue.

Simon's use of modern technology, specifically the internet, is absolutely essential for his coming out process because it connects him to people. This, of course, comes with the caveat that it connects him to his blackmailer as well. Yet when I recall Cameron Post in her small midwestern town, rolling a TV into her room and consuming queer media through movies she rents at the local movie rental place, with the cashier leering at her as she selects a movie featuring lesbian swimmers, there is this entrapment and vulnerability that she experiences that Simon does not because of his ease of access that exists exclusively within the more modern era. Simon does not need to borrow the house phone to connect to another gay person – he can drive to Atlanta and go to a gay bar, he can post anonymously on social media and connect with another gay individual, he can be outed as gay online and receive in-person support from people who are also LGBT, saw the post online, and chose to show support though they did not share a connection with Simon previously. The internet then acts as a connector, an opportunity to share information, which is both positive and negative. The positive, however, appears to outweigh the negative in this book because of the way in which it facilitates connection and community. Creeksecrets, an anonymous Tumblr blog, enables Simon to connect to another gay boy in his high school, Blue and/or Bram, who feels disconnected from person-to-person relationships due to the elements of performativity prevalent high school. The message of positivity, paired admittedly with the negative possibility of bullying and narrative loss, depicts a relationship with the internet that can build up an anonymous gay community for an otherwise isolated teen that is not out or that has come out but that has not come out to everyone. This stands in stark contrast with the presentation of the internet in Danielle M. Stern's essay, "You Had Me at Foucault: Living Pedagogically in the Digital Age." In her abstract, as well as the first couple of pages, she describes the internet as "spaces we increasingly occupy [that] only encourage more

performativity and identity play”, where the internet is harmful to queer people due to the greater needs to perform, and the growing disparity between the public persona and the private person. But the internet is also where she hopes that, in the future, “social media can bridge the accessibility gap to move toward an emancipatory theory of pedagogical bodies in the digital age” (Stern 250). This accessibility gap in information is the difference between Cameron Post and Simon Spier, where Simon can use the internet to access people like himself. If performativity is removed from the internet, if negative images are removed from the internet, if the focus on appearance and lifestyle is removed, then the internet can become a place to celebrate diversity and free people from physical encumbrances, like appearance, like ability, so that they can instead connect and present the private in the public sphere of wifi. Overall, this essay uses some personal anecdotes as well as research to argue why the internet can be harmful, and this can certainly be true for some lgbt+ people, especially without proper Right to Be Forgotten laws allowing dysphoric pictures, names, blackmail material, to remain online forever. This broad outlook, inclusive to trans- and non-binary individuals on the lgbt spectrum, however, is not within the scope of the paper. It is through the lens of *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, as well as through a psychological lens, it can also be argued that the potential anonymity of the internet can facilitate a sort of liberation, and that liberation can enable gay teens to feel community. Cameron Post has to experience psychological violence from her hometown, specifically her church and school, both supposedly safe spaces, and she has to be forcibly sent to a conversion camp, before she finds her community at said camp – a locale that is fully occupied by LGBT+ teens. Simon, however, initially uses the internet to find likeminded individuals, i.e. his email pen-pal turned boyfriend, Blue. It is then only through the intrusion of

the public, i.e. blackmailer Martin Addison, upon the anonymous internet forum, that there is threat and loss of narrative control.

Threat and loss of narrative control in this book stems from the overt blackmail and later bullying, but it also stems from the heterosexual construction of queerness and outness. Martin Addison blackmails Simon because he wants to date Simon's female friend, Abby. Martin can do so because he has screenshots of emails Simon has been exchanging with his anonymous pen-pal Blue, wherein they explicitly and frequently talk about their lives, their feelings and the constant experiences and pressures associated with performativity. One of many ruminations on performance, specifically gender performance, is seen when Simon discusses the athletes' spirit day, Gender Bender:

It's funny how it ends up being the straightest, preppiest, most athletic guys who go all out for Gender Bender. I guess they feel secure enough in their masculinity that they don't care... I guess the one thing that's weird for me is dressing like a girl. What no one knows... is that dressing up used to mean something to me (Albertalli 65).

Performance of gender roles is here subverted through this school sanctioned "Gender Bender" (Albertalli 65). But the import of the performance is in who can most easily participate: straight, athletic guys. Though Simon points to a security in the male identity, it is more about the security in sexuality – straight men, boisterously, overtly straight men, can parody women's dress because their sexuality, their gender identity, won't be questioned. Simon's description of these conventional straight guys indirectly points to the stereotype of the feminine gay man. Hypermasculine people can dress as women and parody women because there is no fear of being

feminized. In fact, these boys have performed so well that the private and the public appear to merge and straight performance is equated with straightness. What is notable here is that one of the performers, the typical “straight” boys, is Bram, otherwise known as Blue, Simon’s email partner. His performance muddles the interpretation of straight presentation and masculine security being exclusively associated with genuinely straight men. But for the most part, the difference in these straight male performances, compared to Simon’s, and also why the act of changing the outward appearance is so much more meaningful to him. Performance then is a great part of Simon’s childhood experience and especially emphasized in the high school. Performance is theoretically shed on the internet because of anonymity – anonymity is like a blank slate, and through that emptiness, that lack of expectation, secrets can be shared. Martin’s intrusion then upon this private internet space, someone’s personal emails, in chapter one creates a pressure for this young adult novel to become a sort of heterosexual romance novel, with Simon acting as a middleman and not a main character, to Martin and Abby – Martin who likes Abby, and Abby who is decidedly not interested in Martin.

But threat also stems from the manner of blackmail, how it is spoken indirectly and forces Simon and readers to emotionally labor and interpret the severity of dangers. Once, Martin says “‘I’ve been thinking. I really want to introduce you to my brother. I think you guys have a lot in common.’” (Albertalli 110). The threat here comes from the fact that Martin’s brother is gay, Martin mentions this in public, and that the only thing Simon and Martin’s brother have in common is their sexuality. The suggestion is a reminder of blackmail, while also a suggestion to latch onto another gay and available man because of their many commonalities. This suggestion happens several times throughout the novel, this time with Abby as an audience, but sometimes

in conversations with just Martin and Simon and no other witnesses. While it is probably not a serious suggestion initially, Martin mentions his brother several times, suggesting that the two meet due to their supposed similarities. Similarities, despite the fact that Simon has never met Martin's older brother and knows nothing about his personality traits or interests. The threat is so powerful because it is both a literal threat and a suggestion about gay people and straight male privilege. Ignore the person you're already seeing, find a real flesh-and-blood stranger, and immediately hit it off because you're both gay and therefore similar. Martin cannot be dissuaded from his feelings about Abby, resorting to blackmail and then, after rejection, using the blackmail material online in a fit of rage. After Martin releases the material and witnesses the bullying and anger he's caused, Martin again mentions his gay brother as he tries to reconcile with Simon and his own guilt. The cyclical suggestions show that he still genuinely believes that Simon is similar and would benefit from knowing, being in a relationship with, Martin's brother. Despite a plethora of other available girls of the same sexuality, Martin likes who he likes and, Simon similarly feels that way about Blue/Bram, yet Martin cannot conceptualize Simon's standards or feelings as preference – rather, it is pickiness.

Pleasure for the gay man then, in this heteronormative assumption of similarity and replaceability, is placed on the backburner. Choice is irrelevant because options are limited and essentially one gay person can replace another; Blue for Martin's older brother, bisexual Cal for Bram – Bram being Blue's in-person, off-the-internet, identity. But pleasure as a feeling and sex, as well as orgasm, as an act, are powerful within the narrative for their capacity to sculpt interpretation about behavior and people. As Greta LaFleur writes in her essay, "Queer Theory's Bad Object,"

[s]ex (as a set of behaviors) in the twentieth century is usually understood to exist in some kind of loosely expressive relationship to sexuality... [and] “there is something unexpectedly refreshing and potentially productive about behavior therapy’s insistence on sex as a behavior unindexed to any broader characterological system – its insistence, that is, on the possibility of sexuality without a subject” (134) (LaFleur 348).

LaFleur reads and describes a scholar named Annamarie Jagose’s work on orgasm. This description articulates that sex acts are not necessarily correlated to sexuality – there is this inherent assumption about “some kind of loosely expressive relationship” between performance and sexuality, but that that assumption is not always true (LaFleur 348). Cameron Post has a boyfriend in high school. Simon had girlfriends. His heterosexual performance made him fit in, but he also admits that

it was easy being in relationships where [he] didn’t really have to think about all the tiny humiliations that come with being attracted to someone... Kissing [girls] is fine. Dating them was really manageable (Albertalli 23).

Sex acts, sex performance, does not require sexuality. Simon can be in these relationships specifically because he is not emotionally invested and cannot be humiliated or shamed if things go wrong. The word “manageable,” like controllable, easy to maintain, says it best. There’s no pleasure in those relationships, they’re just “fine” (Albertalli 23). Only when Cameron Post and Simon Spier pursue same-sex relationships with people they care about, only then do they experience orgasmic pleasure. The import of that physicality, of that pleasure, is multifarious – to normalize sexual acts, to normalize pleasure, to show the value of feelings to actions, and to

connect a certain normality to all sex acts. In *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, Simon and Blue grow increasingly flirtatious and, with increasing flirtation, delve deeper and deeper into talk about sex, at one point even emailing about baguette eating and masturbation. But Simon has experience with girls – pointless experience – he has dated and kissed girls previously and that experience holds little to no value for him and that behavior, that extent of heterosexual performance, ends before the email writing even begins. The interior excitement of these interactions with Blue, a person who is not known, comes only from a trust in the mutual interest, intellectual attraction and a shared sexuality. Their behavior follows their emotions and the pleasure that stems from that is great. It becomes greater still when there is no secret, when they reveal their identities to each other at the book's end, essentially coming out to each other, and share in that oneness.

Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda is a book about reveals, about the perpetual act of coming out, of considering coming out, of being partially out, of choosing and sometimes not choosing to come out and the trickle down of information. In a way, this dispersal of information is similar to Cameron Post because information is held by a select few – in Cameron's case, Lindsey, her lesbian ally, her ex-boyfriend, and her crush Coley Taylor, and in the case of Simon, Blue and Martin Addison – and then dispersed in a manner not controlled by the narrator. Yet the dispersal of knowledge in Simon's experience is more technologically complex in its narrative dispersal, and Simon ultimately has more narrative control over his coming out moments – he has several that he chooses to share with family, friends, a community that he feels safe to communicate with, while Cameron comes out only once, to her deceased parents, and only at the novel's end, after she comes to realize that her own small-town community is not

safe. Simon's continual coming out process is more accurate to life, yet it diverges from the "coming out" plot of the nineties. *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* is a book written in the early 2010's that is set in the 90's, harkens back to that era with its references and its narrative structure, though still working in ways to subvert the simplicity of the "coming out" plot. But more modern novels depict queerness in a more full way, like through the repeated moments of coming out.

Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda is fully in the present – the narrative is not told in reflection, and the technology enables the characters to be more fully immersed in their identities. Simon connects with his boyfriend through a Tumblr blog post describing aloneness, and giving voice to being gay without knowing another gay or queer person. The internet connects in this capacity. While it also is used as a weapon to out Simon because his emails are violated and used as blackmail material, it also backfires in a way because the internet offers the capacity for community and support, as when "[t]hese two lesbian girls I don't even know come up to me at my locker and hug me... One girl even confirms that Jesus still loves me" (Albertalli 188). The violence done through the blackmail, through the manipulation of his coming out narrative, is still done, but that violence also brings about an opportunity to foster community. After the violence, teachers and students show their support, their own identities as queer people or as allies, and choose to stand against bullying, homophobia, and heteronormativity. It is like Cameron Post going to conversion camp and meeting and interacting and bonding with gay and lesbian people – the community is there as a safety net, a family, to give emotional comfort in times of duress. Ultimately, the queer community is so much more readily available in these modern novels and supports the transition from in the closet to out, out and out again.

Further, in *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, there is this import of time: present as in modernity and present as in the moment, instead of a narrative in reflection. The overlap of modernity and present-tense can make the narrative relatable to its current target audience: young adults. The sense of the events as happening real-time, instead of in the past with campy reflection about the journey, further adds to relatability – the narrator is within the audience’s age group and experience. In the typical “coming out” plot, there is a return and

this return typically involves a retrospective exegesis, from the perspective of an “out” adult gay or lesbian subject, in which every aspect of his or her adolescent life can be understood in terms of its relation to the eventual realization of homosexual identity (Gordon 1).

This narrative structure is like the literary equivalent of ‘it gets better eventually, this too shall pass,’ as spoken by an adult to a struggling youth. Consider the social media campaign “It Gets Better,” which uses videos of celebrities to encourage people to stand against bullying and to support struggling LGBT+ youths to not commit suicide. The abstract of the study “It Gets Better: Queer Futures, Critical Frustrations, and Radical Potentials,” notes that

Queer critiques of the project and its founder... were quick to challenge the privileged and homonormative investments from the outset of the campaign, rejecting the campaign as passive, impractical, homogenizing, and exclusionary (Abstract Goltz).

Another study further notes that the campaign places “places the burden of a “better” life onto the emotional lives of LGBT youth” and an article observes that while the message of ‘it gets better’ may support some affected youths, the campaign struggles because the message is not

supported by action, like efforts to make legislation changes or grassroots organizations to support LGBT+ homeless youths and/or isolated and desperate youths (Abstract Grzanka) (Doyle). The narrative told in reflection, attempting to show improvement and liberation is akin to the media campaign – theoretically helpful, but not fully accessible or useful to the people they both attempt to reach. The experience of the first-person narrator in the present reflecting on their queerness is important because it is immersive, more relatable and because it showcases the struggles, the triumphs and tribulations as well as the despair, in a more holistic way without the vapid promise of eventual joy. Cyrus Grace Dunham prefaced their memoir with an introduction discussing resolution in their experience as a transitioning non-binary individual. They wrote:

I could try to tell a story that ends with resolution, but the only way to succeed would be to lie. If I lied, I would be whole at the end of the story... I would superimpose alienation onto every moment of my life leading up to self-acceptance (Dunham 3).

The quote points to the fact that narrative does not have an overt beginning or ending – identity is not a constant and there is no clear end that demarcates the end of a transition or the end of an experience. The “coming out” trope ends after one coming out moment, but that process is a life-long process and the resolution that the trope provides, after that one release, is a falsehood, a platitude. The narrative is then hinging upon falsehood and others creep in – the utter solitude, the way in which sexuality is the most relevant factor to the narrative. But the narrative in the first-person present, away from that tired and boring trope, is often more random and more varied than a reflective narrative focusing solely on “the eventual realization of homosexual identity” (Gordon 1). Often, characters in modern young adult novels are already aware of their

queerness – Cameron and Simon both know of their same-sex attraction and introduce that to the readers within the first chapter. Cameron is kissing her childhood best friend, void of language but aware of difference, while Simon has language – Simon can name his sexuality and his threat, Martin Addison’s blackmail, immediately and that threat becomes a way for the story to display difference and awareness of difference for Simon. In both cases, the narrators are aware of their own attractions and the reader is also made aware immediately; the discovery happens, but not within the confines of the book. Thus, the narrative is less about the discovery, the liberation, and the eventual joining of the queer community, and more about the awkward journey of high school boys and girls in their efforts to seek out relationships, understanding families and friends. For the most part, Simon already has a theoretical community so the journey is the psychological one, full of thoughts about gender, sexuality, the process of coming out, like in this email from Simon to Blue, “[s]traight people really should have to come out, and the more awkward it is, the better. Awkwardness should be a requirement” (Albertalli 145). What I love about this book, what made me think about this project, was the constant questioning of the ‘norm,’ of what needs to be spoken and what can remain unspoken – why it is necessary for some to clarify their sexuality and not others, as this quote suggests through the idea of everyone, of straight people, being forced to come out as well.

Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda truly works to be a modern novel in all senses of the phrase – it is present tense, it is a novel with technology, it deals with the modern-day issues of internet dating and coming out again and again. It functions as a narrative because of the historical legwork of previous queer narratives, at first unhappy with the gay character dying tragically, and then transitioning to the “coming out” plot and then transitioning to these happy

romcom narratives with coming out and teen angst and overall friendship and community.

Through the narrator's relationship with Blue, he discovers how little he knows about other people and about how little they know about him – his sexuality, Abby's father and why he lives separately from her, why his little sister is at home less and less, his older sister's boyfriend. The discovery is interwoven into his narrative coming out experience; his ruminations about knowing, about having this secret, teaches him that while others do not know about him, he similarly does not know about them. His experience with coming out with his sexuality repeatedly leads him to question his relationships with the people around him because he's known them for so long and he's so close to them, and yet he does not know about them. As he navigates his sexuality, he learns about himself, he learns about his friends, and realizes that coming out comes in many different forms and that the unspoken is not necessarily the unimportant. Because yes, they never spoke of his sexuality, and, yes, they never spoke of Leah's family situation or Abby's family situation, but all of those components still built into their persons and all of those things were still valued.

The Miseducation of Cameron Post Book Analysis

The “coming out” narrative trope, a queer lit trope akin to the marriage plot, was a popular, though now overused, trope in adult novels that essentially ended with a cathartic release, a great coming out moment. *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, by Emily M. Danforth, is an apparent child to this trope. The basic plot of the novel is a coming-of-age narrative about titular character Cameron Post, who is a lesbian. She is aware of her sexual difference from the first chapter, when she kisses her childhood friend Irene, and throughout the book, Cameron discovers the significance of her sexuality to herself, others, and her life. Other notable happenings in the book include the death of her parents, her change in guardianship to a born-again aunt, the aunt sending her off to conversion camp, and then her escaping conversion camp. It is in this escape that Cameron seeks closure and acceptance about her parents’ death and her sexuality. Cameron and her friends go into the woods and towards the site of her parents’ death and there she shares her sexual identity with her deceased parents, effectively taking control of her coming out. That divulging of sexual identity and release is akin in style to the coming out plot and suggests that the novel was inspired by it. However, the book shifts the trope in several key ways, including, most notably, the number of times the main character comes out. Further, I found, the book also shifted several other queer stereotypes to create a more powerful, more comprehensive, lesbian text. This book’s deliberate evocation of narrative tropes, like the “coming out” plot, is used by the author to discuss narrative, specifically how narrative is formed and how tropes can be changed for the better.

The focused segments of *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* is a way to configure the novel to appear to be a typical coming out plot. The first section of three being the shortest, one

summer, in the year 1989, when she is twelve and discovers that she has an interest, a desire, for kissing her childhood friend, Irene Klauson... And also discovers that her parents have both died in an accident on the winding road near Quake Lake. The second section actually skips three years, and cuts to Cameron's high school years, 1991-1992. Then the third section is titled God's Promise, named after the Christian school and conversion camp that is meant to help Cameron overcome her supposed sexual disfunction and reunite her with God. This section spans the years 1992-1993, when she is sixteen to seventeen years old. These three parts organize the narrative strictly by important events and time, and the focus on these formative times in Cameron's life cut out other, superfluous or unnarratable, moments that are implied by the narrative. Overall, the organization of the novel relies upon conventional queer plots, and these choice plot elements are notable to me in the way that they are shifted to change from the familiar to the authentic, and less familiar, narrative of a single lesbian character. The focus on specificity – Cameron's experiences with her religious aunt, her trauma at the conversion camp, and her contact with her found family, then, is used to change narrative tropes; her narrative is not a cookie cutter plot that can apply to most. Further, consider the way in which two sections are named, and how the last section, in particular, is named. Part one is simply the season and year. It spans a very brief period in time, but it is notable for the two reasons listed in the previous paragraph: the main character's burgeoning sexuality as well as her new identity as an orphan, both of which make her a vulnerable figure in small town Montana. The second section then is high school, and the part is simply labeled "High School[,] 1991-1992" (Danforth 73). In the high school section, Cameron Post swims, does track, watches movies, and becomes friends with several boys, another lesbian girl named Lindsey, and Coley Taylor, a straight girl who may or may not be as heterosexual as she claims to be. Here the main character is of high school age and participating

in high school-esque activities, like club sports and prom. But it is not a specific name – high school, as opposed to the school’s name, as opposed to freshman year. This lacking specificity can be a way to encourage slippage, to show the universality of the high school experience, and to make the character feel known. The reader may be heterosexual and view Cameron’s experience as inherently different due to her sexuality, yet the character’s high school experience is familiar to readers. Then, of course, there is the shift in the third section. She is told she will be sent to conversion camp at the end of section two and it is devastating for Cameron and the reader, and it is when it becomes apparent how little control Cameron has over her own life. Here, in this section, is the most specific title, the title “God’s Promise” (Danforth 257). This section’s title is the name of the Christian school she is sent to that promises to unite homosexuals to God, supposedly, and the name is vital here. I am fascinated by the dual meaning of the word promise; in one sense, it is an exchange between individuals that morally binds them to do or not do something, like keep a secret, and in another sense, it is the great potential of an individual, their promise in a specific field. The name has power, and so it is not just generically strict, homophobic Christian school but rather “God’s Promise” and whatever that entails for the characters. Of course, there is an irony in the name; what does God promise? As this section continues, it becomes more and more apparent that no one running God’s Promise knows what they’re doing – then the promise is empty, unfulfilled, and ultimately more focused on the people who believe in the system, in sexual perversion or corruption, than in the Christian religion and the Christian God. Through the sections’ naming, then, there is a transition from no name for a section to a specific name for a section. That specificity displays character development as Cameron ages and becomes a character more and more capable of naming and describing what’s

happening to her and how it impacts her, and in the end of the novel, when she uses her autonomy to gain control of her narrative.

Of the two books I selected, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* has made several very notable decisions regarding formatting; one is in the section divisions, another is in the reference embedded within the name of the novel itself, and the third is in the author's structuring of language. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* is blunt with its language – the language is rather simple and clear, obviously imitating the thoughts and words of a teen boy, overtly entering his perspective and his constructs of his life, of his narrative, through his emails – he is quite literally within the book writing and naming his experience. It is a first-person narrative, like *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, but Simon is plainspoken and it is apparent that he narrates the whole story. Cameron also narrates the whole story, but she does so in two ways. For the most part, the story appears to be in present tense. Yet every once in a while, she narrates from the future, reflecting on the impact of particularly powerful moments, like when she learns that her parents are dead. In the present tense, Cameron remains often unaware, oblivious and/or vulnerable. When she comments from the future, she is more distant and self-aware. Compared to *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* is a very secretive book regarding language. In the first chapter of *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, at the end, Cameron's grandma wants Cameron to leave a sleepover and come home because her parents have died. The language in this moment, I feel, epitomizes the character's capacity for concrete external description as well as her inability to communicate her feelings with words. In other words, Cameron's narration uses concrete language to depict emotional events and the hard

language of that description displays a hidden, more emotional, pain that is never really verbalized within the story:

And then from the kitchen, Mrs. Klauson, her voice like I'd never heard it,
like it was broken, like it wasn't even hers...

"It's something really bad," Irene said to me, her voice not even a whisper.

I didn't know what to say back. I didn't say anything.

We both knew the knock was coming... there was empty time between the
end of those steps and the heavy rap of his knuckles: ghost time (Danforth 24).

In the first sentence, Cameron puts distance between herself and Mrs. Klauson, a woman who is like a second mother to her. Cameron does so by misrecognizing her voice – "like it wasn't even hers," by asserting it as unfamiliar and distant, off, "broken" (Danforth 24). Then, of course, Irene, her childhood friend, her childhood crush, names that something is wrong, "something really bad" (Danforth 24). Irene can verbalize her concern, yet Cameron cannot. She doesn't speak in this scene. She claims it is because she "didn't know what to say back," but it is notable that both Irene and Cameron are working with the same information, they can hear the same things, and yet Cameron doesn't know what to say, doesn't use any feeling language in the passage, and Irene can at least note that something is wrong (Danforth 24). Thus, for most of the duration of the book, Cameron Post is a character who avoids feeling and avoids speaking about feelings. The descriptions are rife with grief, confusion, a weight of childish pain where the pain is not fully understood, and yet there are few words to describe those feelings. The description is very concrete – grief is instead conveyed through sound: the voice, the pause that is "ghost

time,” time that is haunted and scary, full of phantoms (Danforth 24). The confusion is in the moment of ambiguity, between knowing and not knowing. Later in the passage, Cameron Post reflects on this moment, stating “I think about him on the other side of that door all the time, even now. How I still had parents before that knock, and how I didn’t after” (Danforth 24). In this slippage, Cameron inserts herself as a narrator in reflection, looking back upon her experiences after the fact, though the narrative is typically presented as in the present moment. She is reflecting upon the past, remembering images and thoughts and ideas and, somehow, in this reflection from the future, she is still a concrete narrator whose feelings are not spoken, who describes things physically, but who still conveys pain by memory, by omission of feeling words, and by action.

Omission is a powerful tool that the author takes advantage of, most notably through her spare usage of the word lesbian; the signifier as well as the signified lesbian figure as unthinkable, unimaginable, and yet evoked through language and the author’s choices show the importance. Historically, the lesbian has often gone without language, in a way that the gay or homosexual man has not. The Bible states that man shall not lie with man, and through this, it is assumed, not stated, that women must also abstain from homosexual desire. Terry Castle speaks to this in *The Apparitional Lesbian* when she writes that “[t]he lesbian remains a kind of “ghost effect”... elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot – even when she is there, in plain view... Some may even deny that she exists at all” (Castle 2). Castle is describing a movie she watched that has one of the most famous heterosexual love scenes, and the woman in that scene is played by a lesbian actress. This movie led her to consider how the lesbian is consistently unseen. But more importantly, she is purposefully unseen or looked over, even when she is visible on screen or in

books. She is so unknown, that people go so far as to claim that she doesn't exist. The language Castle uses is so full in this passage, "elusive, vaporous," the language makes the lesbian appear almost mythic or fantastical (Castle 2). As if the lesbian woman is a unicorn, ghostly and ethereal, something you can claim does not exist. In *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, the minimal language and the often purposeful avoidance is an impediment to the coming out process because avoidance relates stigma and when language is not used, it is not learned or understood.

Irene asked me, "Do you think we'd get in trouble if anyone found out?"

"Yeah," I said right away, because even though no one had ever told me, specifically, not to kiss a girl before, nobody had to. It was guys and girls who kissed – in our grade, on TV, in the movies, in the world (Danforth 10-11).

In the first section, as Cameron kisses her childhood friend, her first partner, she has no language for her experience and the language is a necessary part for her to understand herself.

Within the narrative of small-town Montana, the word "homosexual" is used in the Bible as a catchall term, and then words of violence, like "dyke" are used. Language and omission of language are of incredible value, especially language about minority groups like LGBT+ people. As Esther Saxey observes, "Names and labels for same-sex desire (such as... 'dyke') provide a meaning for otherwise unintelligible feelings, but also often hold negative associations" (Saxey 36). Language can thus ground and give voice to emotions, but the language of naming, of assigning a signifier to a sign, is typically a power of the dominant group, who essentially control the narrative. These terms then have negative associations when they are used, and when the language is avoided, it is a form of erasure. Thus, the invisibility of the word 'lesbian' as well as

the negativity of the word 'dyke' are internalized. Once this language is introduced, the terms continue to impede Cameron's capacity for understanding herself. It is only on page 135 that the word "lesbian" is finally used, although it is assumed that she must have learned this word previously, in a time that is not narrated. In the first passage within the story to use the word "lesbian," Cameron "in private imagin[es] Coley every time [she] watched any movie with even a hint of lesbianism" (Danforth 135). The words of violence, like "dyke," are used multiple times and are used by characters that exert power within Cameron's narrative; Cameron's short-term boyfriend, as well as swim team pals. For the first usage of the word "lesbian," however, it is notable that Cameron is the one who uses the word – Cameron who is gradually using language to begin to control her own story. It is through personal acceptance of herself within the term that she can use it to imagine herself with another. The term grants her community with another girl as well as to a cinematic reality. Yet at this point, the control she has over her narrative, over her life, is still very limited.

It takes over a hundred pages to use the one word lesbian and it is only used to imagine herself with a straight girl, as if she is inserting herself into a heterosexual love story. Her performing for Coley Taylor's sexual desires simultaneously sidelines her own fantasies of reciprocal love and sex because to take on Coley's fantasy, she must perform the male role. At the peak of their relationship, Cameron orally pleasures Coley and Coley almost reciprocates. But they are interrupted by Coley's brother, and ultimately, they are interrupted by reality. Cameron and Coley's relationship is an impossibility; it is performance on Cameron's part and any hopes for their relationship to become reality are fantasy also on Cameron's part. Coley has a boyfriend, and further, she does not believe in her own interest in women.

“‘It goes against everything,’ she said, some of her voice buried in the pillow.

‘This is like – it’s just supposed to be silly and whatever. I don’t want to be like that.’ ... ‘Like a couple of dykes,’ she said” (Danforth 226).

Coley buries herself even as she experiences arousal in a consensual sexual tryst. She literally covers her head with a pillow, possibly to hide her own expression, to avoid seeing Cameron, or to avoid her own guilt towards what she believes to be an unforgiving homophobic God. Sexual interest as a phase, as something simple and silly, appears acceptable to her. Yet the serious, the real, that fantasy that Cameron hopes for is an impossibility. The moment Cameron confesses her love, Coley feigns ignorance, stating and then insisting that Coley “didn’t know that” and was thus less responsible because she was unaware of the depth of feelings involved in this transaction (Danforth 226). Finally, Coley’s derogatory language continues to put distance between herself and lesbians or “‘dykes,’” creating this sense that Coley wholeheartedly believes that her interest is acceptable only because it is a passing phase and not a reality with feelings (Danforth 226). Essentially, then, Cameron inserts herself into a separate fictional narrative where she plays a performative and one-sided role as the other lover. Omission and then, later, usage of language, communicate the necessity of language in naming experience, in understanding experience. Yet, mental violence and damage to the psyche is instead evident in Cameron’s own imagination as the other lover or the other man, untouched, and thus capable of maintaining a fantasy of masculine heterosexual performance.

The conversion camp God’s Promise becomes a community-building opportunity for socially isolated gay and lesbian children in mid-western America. After Cameron’s sexual performance, her narrative spins rapidly out of control due to Coley Taylor. Coley paints herself

as a victim in a lesbian scheme of conversion – sexuality, for all intents and purposes, appears to be fluid in these peoples’ minds (Coley, Aunt Ruth, and more). To combat this homosexual agenda, Cameron is removed to God’s Promise to one, convert to heterosexuality, and two, not harm others’ with her sexuality. But God’s Promise, a place where homosexuality would be a known, albeit disliked, secret, that conversion camp actually becomes a place of community building and of un-learning for Cameron as she meets other gay and lesbian people. Further, while homosexual identity words, like “lesbian” or “homosexual,” are disapproved of by conversion staff, as disapproved by her family, the students within the institution use and teach Cameron to use that language as well as language to identify and name their collective trauma. Part two of the novel ends with the realization that Aunt Ruth, Aunt Ruth’s boyfriend, their local pastor, and her grandmother all know Cameron’s sexuality – a coming out moment where the narrative has been stolen from Cameron and is instead told like a true crime gossip mill, winding from the voice of Coley, a consenting partner, into a twisted narrative of lesbianism as a contagion passed from a lesbian to Cameron and then almost passed to Coley. Though, it must be noted, this narrative is also stolen from the narrator – what readers see is the conclusion of that communication and then Cameron’s assumption about the way in which news traveled throughout the community, which once again ties into the act of knowing and not knowing. Cameron guesses how the information traveled, and her conjectures come from what she heard and what people told her after the fact. Yet even without control, there can be knowledge. This section ends by asserting Cameron’s helplessness and vulnerability because her narrative is not hers in her small community that conceives of sexuality as disorder and disorder as homosexual agenda or spreadable virus, a disease to be cured. Then part three begins with a sense of betrayal, as people who supposedly want the best for the main character shift into misguided figures that

do not know what's best but pretend to know anyways. This betrayal, and the feelings that come with it, the unspoken feelings, are seen when Cameron goes home from God's Promise for the holidays.

It was strange to see all the disciples walk off into the airport without me. It made me feel lonely in a way I can't quite explain, especially since I was going home for the first time in months. But I guess that says something, maybe more than something, about what home now meant to me (Danforth 339).

The community she has fostered with the students in her conversion camp is evident in the language. She identifies with them, feels attached to them, in a way that makes her "feel lonely" when they "walk off... without [her]" (Danforth 339). Here, she is removed from God's Promise, and the removal to her hometown forces Cameron to realize what "home" means to her (Danforth 339). She ruminates that she "was going home for the first time in months" and recognizes that "home now meant" something different (Danforth 339). What does home mean? It is not her physical house, where she grew up with her parents, Aunt Ruth and her grandmother. After being forced from that home to go to conversion camp, after being betrayed by her family and small-town community, that home no longer feels safe or welcoming. But it is also not the conversion camp – Cameron does not buy into the system of changing one's sexuality, and she runs away from the camp. Instead, the quote suggests that home is the people that she has come to identify herself with.

Cameron's recreation of a family builds into a greater queer narrative of chosen families. The destruction of the nuclear family unit and the restructuring of the family unit through the accepting queer community has been a common queer trope rooted in history. In Ellen Lewin's

work, she expounds on ideas presented in *Families We Choose*. She asserts that “*Families We Choose* (1991) begins to address the question of what we mean by “family” and how the very concept of “kinship” can be shaped and interpreted under a variety of cultural conditions” (Lewin 975). Chosen families have been put in direct opposition to nuclear families, and homosexuality has been put in direct opposition to family values in newspapers. In “Family Values Versus Valuing Families of Choice,” Anne Bathurst Gilson depicts the Christian fears of homosexuality, recalling the 1983 Moral Majority Report [that] referred to AIDS with the headline “Homosexual Diseases Threaten American Families.” Family values are heterosexual values in this narrative, but also, ironically, values that remove their children from private life and public life since these family values lead to relatives sequestering their children in conversion camps. One of the disciples of God’s Promise is the son of a politician and his removal from his home to the conversion camp is both a way to ‘fix’ him but also a way to prevent others from knowing about him. Family values then are not truly about family. Aunt Ruth’s presentation of care while simultaneously desiring Cameron’s performance in be Ruth’s wedding, Jane Fonda’s mother transitioning to modern suburban life from a commune; these people are twisted because their efforts to support conventional family values actually undermine their nuclear families. The characters all have diverse experiences coming into God’s Promise, ranging from the zealous highs of religion to the lows of poverty, prostitution and drug addiction. Jane Fonda, for example, was raised on a commune and, while on the commune, got into a snowmobile accident. She lost a leg. Her name is a jarring choice that harkens to the actress Jane Fonda, and the name connects her to suburban life – Jane’s mother sees a magazine about Jane Fonda and takes it as a biblical sign that they must change. Born again Christian mother sees the religious significance in a tabloid featuring the name Jane Fonda. Yet, beyond the specifics of

each character, they all share a commonality – they are not heterosexual and their families and/or communities are not accepting of it, instead insisting upon supposed family values – hence, why they are in God’s Promise. That bond, forged through the common experience of pain, brings the students together. It is through the adversity that they come to each other and learn, through their community, that they should not self-hate, that they should not suffer to be there, and then, through all of that, Cameron learns to take action and leave.

Through most of the book, Cameron Post, as well as a host of other characters, are victims of mental violence, ranging from purposeful omissions of language to derogatory language to teaching/preaching self-hatred and treating sexuality as a series of temptations that must be resisted; these presentations of violence portray common elements of queer narrative but are made more impactful, more original, by the setting. The book was published in 2012 but is set in 1989 to 1993. The setting for the most obvious abuse, at God’s Promise, is in 1992-1993. As Anna Coatman articulates, “[b]oth the book and the film are set in the 1990s, which, at the point when Akhavan was working on the screenplay, seemed to be at a safe distance from the present” (Coatman 37). The choice to set the book in the nineties has dual roles. On the one hand, it makes the violence feel distant, as the article asserts. The distance is facilitated by the difference in time period, but it is also a distance created by what is seen today. Discrimination today is more subtle than it used to be; everyday discrimination is seen through microaggressions, the gentrification and commercialization of traditionally gay areas, bathroom accessibility for trans people (O’Sullivan n.p.). There is still physical violence, but there are so many ways to forget it, to not see it, to see the violence as a deviation from the norm. Therefore, to some, the violence people of various sexual orientations or gender identities face appears over.

But on the other hand, the book's relevance suggests that the issues raised by the book are still prevalent today. For example, the movie adaptation was released in 2018. Further, Christian conversion camps are still a part of the national discourse, and are still supported openly by some people, like current Vice President Mike Pence (Coatman 37). The violence of the Christian conversion camps, like God's Promise, occur because that violence is condoned in the home first. Every character who is at God's Promise is there because they have someone in their household, like a parent or a guardian, who subscribes to these harmful beliefs and, maybe, the characters themselves subscribe to them too. Cameron's roommate, for instance, actively works to change herself and at times acts as a monitor for others. The behavior is actually quite similar to the idea of the panopticon, this literary theory about the perfect prison, where there is a tower that can look down on people without them seeing in, and the people end up self-monitoring, self-policing, because they are unsure if they are being watched (Foucault n.p.). At God's Promise, they are being watched, but not constantly – viewing is instead a constant threat since there are no locks on doors. Lydia and Pastor Rick, plus a couple part-time staff, run the institution so the disciples of God's Promise are ultimately indoctrinated to watch and police, to varying levels of effectiveness. After a self-harm incident happens at God's Promise, an investigation occurs to see whether or not it was due to negligence and Cameron attempts to articulate her experience:

“You asked me if I trusted them, and like, I trust them to drive the vans safely on the highway, and I trust that they'll buy food for us every week, but I don't trust that they actually know what's best for my soul... the whole fucking purpose of this place is to make us hate ourselves so that we change” (Danforth 399-400).

This moment is a really significant moment since it's one of the few times Cameron attempts to communicate, really articulate, her experience to other people, specifically adults who are presumably heterosexual. The language of "trust" is really important for this passage, but also for the book as a whole because Cameron's trust is continually broken by people that should uphold it (Danforth 399). The weight of the word in the section is a simple "trust," like a capability and that is something she can grant to the workers at God's Promise, as well as to her Aunt Ruth, as well as, she initially hopes, to the man she speaks to (Danforth 399). He fails to live up to her trust, though mostly because there's a failed communication Cameron cannot convey to him the second meaning of trust. That "trust" is the ability to believe that someone cares for you, wants what's best for you – the trust any child, any adolescent, should have for their caretakers (Danforth 399). Ultimately, this moment is a moment of failed communication because Cameron once again tries to trust in that potent sense that the man interviewing her will genuinely listen and understand because it's his job to listen and understand. Yet he fails to and his failure to understand the nuances of trust is evident to Cameron.

God's Promise represents the ways in which well-meaning intentions can be destructive and thus that trauma can stem from theoretically loving sources. For background, the conversion camp God's Promise is spearheaded by a woman named Lydia, and Rick, her nephew, who is a supposedly reformed gay man and the quintessential success story for the program. The two wholeheartedly believe in their mission that has no determined end-date and run the conversion camp in the hopes of having these students graduate from homosexuality. Cameron's Aunt Ruth, her grandma, her experimenting but still religious friend Coley Taylor, they all buy into this idea of conversion, of sexuality as a choice that can be resisted, ignored and combatted until it fades

into the ether. Cameron's pain stems from these people, both within her community and within God's Promise, that believe in a faulty system. This struggle between Cameron and others is a way of understanding narrative control. As Jordan Hoffman asserts in his review of the movie, everyone at God's Promise, "[e]veryone's anguish is coming from outside sources," these outside sources being misinformed people and their misplaced hope for heterosexuality to be the one sexuality to end all others, to be the one that proliferates and flourishes (Hoffman). Cameron cannot control other people's emotions and so she cannot control their homophobia. She can't control their reactions and she can't control their narratives. But by the novel's end, she is old enough to leave those people, to choose to cut them off to protect herself and her life. Conversion camps are built on false hopes by homophobic people and God's Promise is a sham for many reasons, but mostly because it is built on erroneous beliefs, like pseudo-psychology, and because there is no realistic narrative that ends with "cured" and/or "reformed" homosexuals.

The simultaneously destructive and invisible experience of the lesbian is a powerful and common theme that the novel builds upon to emphasize liberation through language and narrative empowerment. In the introduction to this section, I talked about this as the simple structure of the story – the shift from ignorance about sexuality at the novel's beginning to the end, where the main character has finally, officially, come out to her deceased parents. This is an important formatting of the story, but the journey is what creates this structure and is also what transforms the narrative from a plain "coming out" plot. That journey of ignorance to acceptance, of being alone to being within a community, and of lacking familial approval to determining she

does not need it. In confronting her parents' death, Cameron speaks to her parents for the first time in the narrative, speaking and giving them narrative space and purpose:

“I don't know if you would have sent me to Promise... you weren't around to and Ruth was, and I can't believe her when she says that it's what you would have wanted for me. Even if it's true, I don't think it's something I have to spend my life believing” (Danforth 468).

Her address makes the parent characters present in a way they were not before. Further, the main character asserts herself, her narrative, in this moment by running away from God's Promise, by addressing her parents, by acknowledging that she does not know them but that she can accept that and imagine them to be their best versions, their most accepting versions, of themselves. She has experienced violence – all of the characters at God's Promise have. Everyone experiences mental violence at God's Promise and the invisible lesbian is a way to destroy the lesbian figure through abortive silence. By coming out to her parents, Cameron effectively ends her silence and establishes that she now has enough control over her life, her narrative, to choose who gets to be a part of her life as well as what ideas get to be a part of her life.

Ultimately, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* is a story about narrative – who understands what is best in life's narrative, who tells a narrative, and what does a narrative mean. Who is in control? The people who run God's Promise, who genuinely believe that they are doing good, despite mounting evidence proving otherwise. Further, the people that tell the narrative are the people in Midwestern towns who think they know what's best, whose eyes follow the spectacle of God's Promise. They are Coley Taylor who consents with Cameron to hold hands in movie theaters, to be alone together, to engage in sexual acts, and then doctors and

shares the narrative to protect only herself. Then, what does the narrative mean and what is its purpose? The narrative is about processing and reflection – the whole novel is a story told after the fact by Cameron – and it is in an effort to understand that opinions can't change, minds cannot be understood, but that these obstacles cannot stop anyone or prevent them from achieving narrative control and personal autonomy. It does not matter if Cameron's deceased parents approve or disapprove of her sexuality because they are not around; so, she should choose to believe that they would support her. Coming out in this narrative is the recreation of narrative. But it is also a play off of the "coming out" trope that ends in the salvation, the release, of coming out. But Cameron Post does better than that 90's writing plot. It complicates the queer narrative with multiple "coming out" moments, displaying a process of knowing and sharing and developing. It complicates the queer narrative with several presentations of queer – lesbian, two spirited, gay – instead of the more conventional heteronormative story with the single gay character, the sidekick best friend, who accounts inexplicably for the entirety of the LGBT spectrum. It places the "coming out" story in a more modern light with an age group that is more relevant – today, people are learning and developing their identities, like their sexualities, in their teens and Cameron Post clearly represents that shift.

Thesis Conclusion

Where Will the Genre Go:

As I was reading the books and scanning research for relevant information, I was struck by the scholarship because it appeared that coming out plots ended in the mid-nineties. Writing about the coming out plot was a process of analyzing scholars' discussions of rather dated books and comparing them to my own reading list. The dated references were useful as a framework for comparing the coming out plot of old to these novels about coming out. More scholarship, however, should be done on these queer young adult novels, especially focusing on the queering of the coming out plot. I know in my efforts to list other book examples, outside of the two books I initially focus upon within this thesis, I found that already the books I'd selected from 2012 and 2015 were dated in their portrayals of white gay and lesbian experience as queerness. To write about these portrayals of white gay and lesbian experience was to discuss the revival of the coming out plot. However, it also dated the research as later books have since been published discussing the experience of coming out as bisexual, pansexual, trans-nonbinary, trans-binary, and some do so while simultaneously depicting the experience of being a person of color.

The appropriation of portions of the coming out plot indicate the enduring importance of coming out in the young adult genre. The totality of the plot, however, including the reflective element and the simple ending, those portions of the plot are decidedly less popular in today's fiction. The disinterest in these elements will most probably continue until they fade into obscurity. The reflective aspect, as noted previously, is difficult for teen readers to relate to since the narrator is older and more detached from the dramas they're depicting. Further, the ending is not popular since it's too simplistic. Happy endings are, strangely, not prevalent in high school

reading and, while the tragic ending can lead to complaints, the narrative ending after a single coming out moment is unrealistic. That type of ending suggests that the story ends with outness, as opposed to the necessity of a continued assertion of queerness to remain out as life goes on. Ironically, due to a greater degree of acceptance, coming out may be more necessary instead of less. Cyrus Grace Dunham's "A Year Without a Name" (2019) essay, later published in their memoir *A Year Without a Name*, speaks to this assertion with the author's insistence on ambiguity and duality as a trans-nonbinary individual; "I lay in my bed and imagined myself as every other thing in the universe, so diffuse and infinite as to be indiscernible—unnameable" (Dunham n.p.). The fluidity of their rendering of identity speaks to their personal anxiety with labeling and the meaning of those labels, but it further speaks to the possibility of being multiple things or ideas at the same time. For them, that means the possibility of being masculine with top surgery and hormones, but it also means embracing a certain femininity as well, and further, Dunham explores the possibility of straddling those two identities with they/them pronouns. The essay, the quote, and the book, then all speak to this fluid existence and this possibility of an ambiguous ending to narrative, because the ending is not known to the writer, because there is no ending for the writer, because there is no neat and tidy bow ending to put on life. Other books published recently also speak to this need for more than the coming out plot offers. One example of a text featuring a trans coming out is *Beauty Queens* (2011) by Libba Bray. This book is a radical parody text featuring women of color, a lesbian, a bisexual and a trans woman who dates a pirate. Given the diversity in the novel, it could also be used to discuss the intersection between race and sexuality or gender identity in queer young adult literature.

The representation of queer people of color texts and the presentation of different coming out moments with trans, bisexual and asexual texts have “queered” the coming out plot. Here, the word “queer” is used to articulate great changes in the coming out plot. The original coming out plot was so formulaic and standard that it was like the heterosexual norm and so queering the plot is to change it to be unpredictable. *Tash Hearts Tolstoy* (2017), by Kathryn Ormsbee, is a young adult romance novel with an asexual narrator. *Ash* (2009) by Malinda Lo, and *In Other Lands* (2017), by Sarah Rees Brennan are both fantasy young adult novels that feature bisexual main characters. *Ash* is a retelling of Cinderella with an attractive female huntress and an ethereal male fairy godmother-type. *In Other Lands* is a story about a boy named Elliot who sees a wall, and beyond that wall are mermaids and sword fighting and the opportunity for Elliot to save the day. The graphic novel *Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up With Me* (2019), by Mariko Tamaki, queers the coming out plot for its rendering of a lesbian girl of color in a toxic relationship. Most, though not all, of Mariko Tamaki’s graphic novels discuss mature themes with lesbians of color. *Are You Listening* (2019), by Tillie Walden, is another graphic novel, but this one presents two different lesbian characters who support each other’s growth on a fantastical road trip. While it may appear more conventional than others on this list, the two characters don’t seek love or community, so much as they stumble upon each other and find acceptance and support within each other. In other words, it’s a book without the pursuit of romance and without the great anxiety of rejection for coming out – the drama instead comes from the past and the magical road trip they’re on. These books all feature queer people, but they’re presented in romances, in fantasies, with friends, with family, in interracial partnerships or with a person of the same skin color or with a pirate. Compared to *Rubyfruit Jungle*, these books are very “queer.”

The not-exhaustive list of books suggests the inherent value of queer folx coming out in young adult literature, but it also shows that diversity begets diversity in a positive feedback loop. I conceptualize this most easily through Chinua Achebe's critiques on *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe loved the book as a child, yet he grew to realize how problematic the portrayal of Africans by white colonists was. In response, he wrote *Things Fall Apart* which shows the African perspective on colonization (NPR n.p.). The first gay young novel published, referenced in the introduction, is akin to this, though the comparison is not perfect. *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip* is a monumental work because it is the first young adult novel to feature a gay main character. Yet, the novel also established the problematic trope of homosexuality as a phase. Presumably, young gay and lesbian people read the book and saw themselves, perhaps for the first time, and that book inspired others. With each new iteration, the books increase and the diversity of representation increases: the same story is not told over and over again. As Susan Driver notes in *Queer Girls and Popular Culture: Reading, Resisting, and Creating Media*, "growing up and coming out queer is not merely a personal process of identity, but involves a cultural process of reassessing, embracing, refusing, and combining media representations" (Driver 2). To come out requires language and language needs to be defined. To come out as lesbian, to come out as gay, a person needs to understand what those words mean and they learn through the people around them and through the media. Culture essentially defines the language people use, as well as the language people discard. The process of identity is a process that is intrinsically related to culture and the ways in which culture shapes our understandings of certain identities. This quote and this necessity to navigate cultural identities in the coming out experience relates to this book *Into the Beautiful North* (2009), by Luis Alberto Urrea. Sidekick Tacho, a young gay man, is out and proud. He's even a small business owner, and his business is

named the fallen wrist, in Spanish, the name being a self-aware play on the perceived femininity of gay men in a culture of machismo. But Tacho is a character defined by that machismo – his playful business name is in stark contrast to that masculine culture. He is defined by it, in his defiance of it. For comparison, Simon contemplates the meaning of coming out, contemplates why others don't come out, contemplates the significance of the straight white male default. These men, these boys, are aware, and pushing against, but still defined by the culture they are a part of. Tacho attempts to embrace and present his homosexuality in every aspect of his life while Simon attempts to normalize coming out so that it is not noteworthy or different. Cameron Post then ends her narrative attempting to choose her parents' definition and/or cultural understanding of lesbian. This constant anxiety of knowing in America, in anywhere, is seen in media and it is also seen in real life, as Divers observes. The interplay of culture and identity is important, so the media representation of characters is important too. Diversity begets diversity in a way because it gives people the language to define themselves and the relatable characters to realize that they needed that definition.

Further Research:

Beyond writing about the explosion in coming out narratives in young adult literature, there needs to be research about how this transition may continue to younger and younger audiences. There have already been picture books depicting gay and lesbian parents, including the infamous gay penguin children's book *And Tango Makes Three* (2005) by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson, illustrated by Henry Cole, and a girl with two fathers in the book *Stella Brings the Family* (2015), by Miriam B. Schiffer and Holly Clifton-Brown. But by and large, scholarship about how queer narratives have percolated from adult literature down to younger and younger audiences should happen. Coming out stories have been introduced to children's

books. Why are these narratives being written now? Is this writing sustainable, i.e. is it going to continue to be written five, ten, years down the line? Is this writing at all related to the influx of media and fame, enabling producers to aim for dedicated niche audiences with diverse casts and politics – like the actor Jonathon van Ness of the *Queer Eye* reboot on Netflix, who wrote a children's book *Peanut Goes for the Gold* (2020) about a nonbinary guinea pig (Gillette n.p.)?

Beyond this, I hope that further research considers how other countries have or have not used the coming out plot. In papers about queering the coming out plot, several reference *Red Azalea* (1994) by Anchee Min, which depicts the coming out experience of the author in communist China. Further scholarship could consider how coming out is addressed in Chinese books today, if they are addressed, and how they compare to Min's book, especially considering how the author published the book in America. Then we should consider how people use social media celebrity status to communicate to their young audience. While social media was mostly discussed in relation to *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* and *Peanut Goes for the Gold*, the impact of media upon the spread of books as well as its impact on who becomes famous and thus who can further propagate narratives. For example, Jessica Herthel is a teen youtuber who wrote the autobiography *I Am Jazz* (2014) and she co-authored the children's book *I Am Jazz* from the same year. I found my own research limited by the books I chose, which were written by white Americans and featured white Americans, and further scholarship should be more aware of this and focus more broadly, looking at other races but also looking at other countries and their coming out literature.

Coming out books will always be relevant because with more acceptance and with greater safety, people will come out more. Books about coming out represent a national

consciousness, with individual authors introducing diverse narratives into the literary canon.

While some components of these books build upon previous narratives, the volume expresses a variety of coming out experiences for people of all ages, sexual identities, races and gender identities.

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